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ADVANTAGES OF A SLIGHT KNOWLEDGE OF HEBREW.

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The importance to every student of theology of a thorough knowledge of the original language of the Old Testament is so evident as to require little argument. It is not so generally realized that even the slight knowledge of Hebrew acquired in the ordinary routine of our divinity schools is of great value. Men who lay aside their Semitic studies as soon as they enter upon the practical duties of life are apt to think the time they have spent upon them has been almost or wholly wasted. Is this true?

It is to be remembered that the whole Bible, the New Testament as well as the Old, was written by men trained in Semitic habits of thought and modes of expression. Any thing which enables us to better understand those habits and forms of expression must therefore necessarily be of value to the student of Scripture. We believe that even a slight study of Hebrew, or of any other Semitic language, will fix in the mind, in a way never to be forgotten, some important knowledge of this kind which cannot be so well acquired in any other way.

Almost the first lesson learned by the tyro in Hebrew is that the language was originally written only in consonants. Except the meager indications of the "*matres lectionis*," the vowels have been subsequently supplied. Of course these vowels are not arbitrary; they constantly determine the grammatical forms and frequently seriously affect the sense. Still they are secondary; the *radicals* are all consonants. It is not so in our Western languages; what may be learned at the start from this difference? Is it not that to the Semite the *root-idea* of his words, as expressed by their radicals, had a greater relative importance than with us? He cared relatively less than we about its modifications and shades of meaning; his main point was in the fundamental idea.

After mastering the alphabet, the learner will very soon attack the paradigm of the verb. The first thing that will strike him here, so at variance with every thing to which he has been accustomed in the Indo-European languages, is the starting-point. It is no longer the Infinitive, nor the first person of the Present; but the third person of the Narrative tense. This not merely carries us back to the dim beginnings of the growth of language; it shows us what the Hebrews must have been always accustomed to look upon as the starting-point in all they had to say,—narrative, or in other words, facts. The history of what had occurred before them was the foundation on which they rested. And the recognition of this, which may be called the historical habit of mind, is a most important factor in understanding the Scripture writers. Is a divine law to be given re-

quiring the heart's obedience of the people to its Author? It starts with the story of the creation of all things by Him. Is the Evangelist to show that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised and expected Messiah? He begins with His genealogy. Are apostles to proclaim to a lost world salvation through Christ? They set out from the historic fact of His resurrection.

The next peculiarity of the verb which is very surprising and perhaps perplexing to one who has been hitherto occupied with the study of the classic tongues is the poverty of the Semitic languages in tense-distinctions. Evidently to the Semites of old, as to the Semitic races now, ideas of time were not prominent, and the nicer distinctions, so accurately expressed in Greek, were almost or quite unknown. It is true that the New Testament authors wrote in Greek and had learned to use its tenses, when they had occasion, with accuracy. Still, their ancestral speech and their sacred books were in a language in which time was a matter of secondary importance. They lived much nearer than we to the idea of "the Eternal Now," to the divine omnipresence in all time as in all space. What a flood of light does this fact cast upon a large part of the prophecies, and especially upon that New Testament prophecy of the *παρουσία* which has been so much misunderstood. To the Hebrew-born apostles the important point was the thing; the time of its manifestation was altogether secondary. In fact, its overshadowing importance gave it the effect of nearness, just as the overhanging cliff, seen through the vista of a clear air, makes us tremble as if it were upon us, though we may know it to be distant. They thought of it, not in its relation to time, but in its relation to the end of all things.

When the student has learned the Qāl of the simple verb, with only its complete and its incomplete tenses, supplemented by its Imperative, Infinitive and Participle, he turns to the other "conjugations" which answer to our Western "voices." Instead of the two of the Latin, or the three of the Greek, he finds in Hebrew seven, in Syriac eight, and in Arabic no less than thirteen forms of the regular verb active and as many of the passive; so that it becomes difficult or impossible to express in English, even by periphrasis, the precise force of each of this multitude of "voices." Here it is at once seen that, although the Semitic mind was singularly indifferent to the time idea in its verbs, it was correspondingly alive to other modifications of the verbal idea.

Space would fail to speak of all the peculiarities of Semitic grammar which throw light upon the modes of thought and expression in writers of Semitic origin. Passing allusion only can be made to the juxtaposition of nouns, by which the latter is made to qualify the former (often indicated by what is called the *construct state* of the former); so that the two together form one complete idea, thus largely supplying the place of compound terms, and making good the poverty of these languages in adjectives. This throws light upon the use of the Genitive in the New Testament, and should have absolutely forbidden such a marginal read-

ing in the Revision as "judge of unrighteousness" for "unrighteous judge" in Luke XVIII., 6. This is as absurd as "hatred of violence" would be for "violent hatred," for instance in Ps. XXV., 19.

In conclusion, a single word may be said of a common Hebrew method of comparison which, especially when it passes into the language of the New Testament, is often misunderstood. When our Lord says, "I thank thee, O Father, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Luke x., 21), we are not to understand that He is thankful that they are hidden from any one, but that they are revealed to babes *rather than* to the wise and prudent. So when He said to the seventy, rejoicing in their power over evil spirits through his name, "In this rejoice not. . . . but rather rejoice," He does not mean to forbid the lower joy, but only to point them to one infinitely greater. Perhaps the passage where inattention to this form of comparison has been most productive of misunderstanding is St. Paul's quotation from Malachi (Rom. ix., 13; Mal. i., 2) "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." It is true that this passage refers not so much to the individuals mentioned, as to their descendants; yet even so, it is a comparison: "I have loved Jacob more than Esau." Familiarity with Hebrew would have prevented any misunderstanding.

It is not to be supposed that the tyro in Hebrew, especially if he takes little interest in its study, will distinctly formulate to himself these and many other facts which help to the knowledge of the meaning of the Sacred Word. But as we all come to have impressions of our acquaintances which guide our conduct towards them, though we may never make any philosophical analysis of their character; so one can hardly learn even a little of the structure of a Semitic language without, even if it be unconsciously, coming to know what he could hardly learn otherwise of the modes of thought and habits of expression of writers of the Semitic race.